

and then they spiraled upwards, bombing the once upscale motels that had long since devolved into low-rate weekly rentals. Bob kept the car in second gear, rolled down the front windows to catch the briny cross-draft as the ocean sucked the orange glob of the sun into its cool depths. He downshifted into first and slowed to a walk at the sight of the sun-browned adolescent legs clipping along in his direction on the sidewalk to his right, a black guitar case swaying at their side.

He passed the girl, cut a left on Wisconsin Street and looped around the block before he crept up behind her and angled to the curb, pulled even and called out the front passenger window, "Hey, you need a ride?" with fluttering thoughts of adding another fairly rare black mark to his record of near-monogamy with Glenda.

The girl, blonde curls bouncing, turned without breaking stride and replied, "How far you goin'?" Bob steered around a parked Honda and cut back to the curb and said, with his thirty-seven year old heart hammering the inside of his sternum, "As far as you want to."

She stopped abruptly and left-faced, placed her free hand on her slim hip and said, "Look man, I'm late for my band practice and all I need's a fucking ride; I don't need some asshole older than my father trying to get into my pants." Bob leaned across the seat and opened the passenger door for her. "Get in," he said, "Practice is important. You wanna be a musician, you gotta practice." She hesitated then stepped off the curb and leaned over and said, "You play, man?" Bob nodded, jerked his thumb at the back seat and said, "Alto sax — slip your guitar back there; those two can keep each company."

Practice was on a patio in a red-tile-roof neighborhood in a terrace cut into a hillside on the eastern boundary of the city, top-of-the-line Toyotas parked at the curbs. Bob sat in, blew notes around the looping bass plucking and strumming chords. It was Robert Johnson blues, Amber moaning for her life and coaxing barb-wire sounds out of her guitar strings. When they played themselves out they stripped down and slipped into the turquoise pool that was riding high with a full-moon bulge, all of them except for Bob, who held onto his sax and blew into Fats Waller's 'Ain't Misbehavin', straight through one time before packing up and heading home.

WHITE STATIC

Bob Urp's mother-in-law, Eloise (Ellie) Morgan, thinks they talk to her through the crackle of white static on the T.V. late at night, when the stations have shut down. Spirits.

They talk; they tell her what to do. And one night they told her that her daughter Glenda's no-good husband — on a night when he stayed out late for no good reason — was out chasing young tail.

And the spirits were right.

Forget that the hapless fellow didn't catch any.

So the old lady, acting on spirit info, wedged a chair under the front doorknob, shut off the garage door opener, and jammed a stick into the track of the sliding glass door. When Bob came knocking late that night, she told him he was evil, that he was probably bringing home AIDS and genital warts.

"So what have you been up to?" Glenda asked as she let him in the sliding glass door into their bedroom. Her mother answered for him from the other side of the hallway door: "Been steppin' out." Bob clarified things: "Been blowin' sax; met a girl who could sing the blues." Glenda placed her fingertips to her jaw and said, "The blues, you say?" Bob shook his head. "Been thinking of asking her to join the band." Glenda brought her palms together in a prayer pose and said, "Indeed?"

That night Glenda seduced Bob, and she was satisfied that he had been true. Had he made love to the young blues singer, he never would have been able to perform for his wife. Not at his age. She wiped the sweat from his high forehead — she had made him work — and rolled over and fell asleep, while Bob lay on his back staring at the ceiling, picturing Amber's naked body through shimmering turquoise, while Ellie Morgan tuned into a blank channel that told her Bob Urp was bad right down to the bone.

DETECTIVE WORK BLUES

A little light detective work led Bob Urp to Amber Gale's abode: one of the small hotels down by the shore that had devolved into a weekly rental place catering to transients and various other societal belly-clingers. He showed up at the door in a pseudo-avuncular mode, stepped in and sat down on the improvised sofa — a two-by-six spanning a couple of cinder blocks — and talked to her and her boyfriend, Roger Karpuk, PFC in the United States Marines, about her musical endeavors, about the blues, blew encouraging words Amber's way while young Roger threw back shots of bourbon and chased them with beers, in dead silence.

Fifteen minutes after Bob's departure, Amber lay bleeding, near death, with a concussion, a fractured eye socket and several missing teeth.